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AUTHOR Young, Michael; Seidensticker, Mary
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ABSTRACT

A study (telephone survey), assessing community support for school family life education programs, had two purposes: (1) to determine acceptability of school sex education programs to residents of northwest Arkansas; and (2) to identify factors related to an individual's acceptance or nonacceptance of such programs. Telephone interviews with 119 participants consisted of a maximum of 16 questions that gathered information concerning general background, educational attainment, religious involvement, experiences in discussing sex with one's own children, and views concerning sex education programs. Two major results indicated that: (1) The majority of people were in favor of public school programs of sex education (74.6 percent); and (2) A majority indicated that parents should be responsible for the sex education of their children (94.1 percent). The study identified age, educational background, talking about contraceptives, religious affiliation, and frequency of church attendance as significant correlates of attitudes toward sex education. These findings generally agreed with those of two of three major studies dealing with the topic. Several tables and references are included. (JM)

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A TELEPHONE SURVEY OF COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX EDUCATION

Michael Young
Health Education Program
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701

Mary Seidensticker
Family Planning Specialist
Washington County EOA
Fayetteville, AR 72701

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A TELEPHONE SURVEY OF COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX EDUCATION

This study deals with attitudes toward sex education. The subject of sex education has received frequent public attention. Public debate in some communities has become a matter of some notoriety. A vocal minority who are oppossed to sex education have often turned their cause into a heated public political issue.

Because of the potential for controversy it seems important for school officials to have the assurance of public support for their sex education programs. Yarber (1979) has indicated that one of the major barriers to the initiation of family life/sex education programs is the presumed lack of community support. This view is supported by recent work (Young and Roth 1982) which indicated that the single most important factor in whether or not a school offered sex education course work, seemed to be the school officials' perception of community support.

As a preliminary to working with area schools in initiating and upgrading existing programs of family life/sex education. We decided to take Yarber's (1979) advice and assess community support for a program of family life education.

The purpose of the study was twofold: (1) to determine the acceptability of school sex education programs to residents of northwest Arkansas and (2) to identify factors related to an individual's acceptance or non-acceptance of such programs.

METHOD

Data were collected by means of a telephone survey. Pages from the telephone directory (Fayetteville, Springdale and surrounding areas) were selected by the use of random numbers. Every twelfth residential number

on a page was called.

The interviewer talked to whoever answered the phone, briefly explained the study and requested the person's participation. Less than 10 percent of the persons called declined participation. The interview consisted of a maximum of 16 questions designed to elicit information concerning, general background, educational attainment, religious involvement, experiences in discussing sex with one's own children, and views concerning sex education programs. Participants were classified as to whether they did or did not favor sex education in the public schools.

Data were analyzed for 119 subjects ranging in age from 15 to 96. The SPSS subprogram "Crosstabs" (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner and Bent, 1975) was utilized to analyze the data to determine if individual's stance on sex education was independent of such variables as age, sex, marital status, number of children, religious affiliation, frequency of church attendance, whether or not they talked to their children about sex and whether or not they talked to their children about contraceptive use.

RESULTS

In response to the question, would you be in favor of public school programs of sex education 88 (74.6%) said yes, 24 (20.3%) said no and 6 (5.1%) were undecided. A majority 111 (94.1%) indicated that parents should be responsible for the sex education of their children. Only 5 (4.7%) indicated that parents should not be responsible. A smaller number 33 (28%) indicated that churches have a responsibility in sex education.

Characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the majority of the persons interviewed were female.

Insert Table 1

About Here

There was a wide age range with more people under the age of 40 than over 40. Most people identified themselves as currently married. The previously married category included widows/widowers and two divorced persons. A substantial number of persons had at least some college experience. A majority of the persons interviewed reported that they had children, however, less than half had children of high school age or younger. The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were affiliated with some type of religious group, and almost half indicated that they attend church services at least once per week. Denominational affiliation was classified, as shown, into fundamentalist, conservative, moderate and liberal from the classification utilized by Peterson and Mauss (1976). Persons indicating that they were not affiliated with any religious group were classified as liberal.

Results of contingency table analysis yielded significant chi-square values for attitude toward sex education and the following variables: age, educational background, talked to children about contraceptives, religiously affiliated and frequency of church attendance.

Insert Table 2

About Here

DISCUSSION

The results of this study raise a number of questions. I will address a few of these which seem to be important and which might be of interest to you.

Age

The variable age was found to be significant in this study and in work by Libby (1970). In both cases younger persons were more likely to favor sex education than older persons. This may be reflective of a more liberal perspective among younger persons in general or of a greater awareness of the

need for this type of educational experience. Mahoney (1979), however, found that the variable age did not discriminate between "anti" and "pro" sex education persons.

Marital Status

Marital status was the variable which made the greatest distinction between "pro" and "anti" individual's in Mahoney's (1979) study. Marital status was also a factor in Snyder and Spritzer's (1976) work. It was not found to be a significant factor in the present study. The under representation of persons who were seperated or divorced (less that 2%) may, in part, account for this.

Educational Background

Educational background was found to be a significant factor in the present study, with opposition to sex education most likely to be voiced among persons with less than a high school education. Snyder and Spreitzer (1976) also found education to be related to attitude toward sex education. Mahoney's (1979) results indicated that not only do those who oppose sex education "tend to have less formal education than those who are in favor... but also have less confidence in educational leaders and are less likely to feel that too little money is being spent on education".

Talking With Children About Sex

Opponents of sex education have been characterized as exhibiting a prohibitive sexual morality (particularly on premarital sex and discussion of sexual matters). Mahoney (1979) cites opposition to premarital sex as a major factor distinguishing those opposed to sex education programs from those favoring such programs. In the present study 94 percent of those interviewed indicated that sex education was at least, in part, a parental responsibility. Results also indicate that having talked to children about sex was not a significant factor. Having talked about contraceptives was a significant factor. Among parents who had children junior high age or

older more than 70 percent indicated that they had talked to their children about sex, but fewer than 30 percent of these parents had talked about contraceptives with their children. It is interesting (and somewhat distressing) to note that of the parents indicating opposition to sex education programs, half indicated that they had talked to their children about sex, but none indicated that they had talked about contraceptives.

Religious Factors

Opponents of sex education programs have been characterized as possessing traditional religious views. Libby (1970) found that those favoring sex education were less religious, while Snyder and Spreitzer (1976) found that frequency of church attendance was related to attitude toward sex education. In the present study both affiliation with a religious group and frequency of church attendance were significant factors while denominational conservatism bordered on significance. Mahoney's (1979) results indicated that denominational conservatism was not a factor in a person's attitude toward sex education. It may be that an individual's decision to affiliate with a religious group and the degree of an individual's personal religious activity are more important than a denomination's designation as liberal or conservative in determining a person's attitude toward sex education. It should also be noted that in the present study, conducted in traditional Bible Belt country only 28 percent felt that the church should have a responsibility for sex education programs. Even among those religiously affiliated and those attending church services at least once a week only a minority felt that the church should have a responsibility for sex education.

In summary, our study has identified age, educational background, talking about contraceptives, religious affiliation, and frequency of church attendance as significant correlates of attitudes toward sex education. These findings are in general agreement with two of the three major studies dealing with this topic. Points of disagreement with the third study (Mahoney's) may be

accounted for in part by differences in sample size, local versus national sample and problems in data analysis associated with the national study.

Yarber's (1979) suggestion of assessing local support for sex education appears to be a good one. Our study showed strong local support, particularly in the under 40 age group. We have followed up this study by working with schools and communities in programs of family life and sex education, both in our immediated area and on a state wide basis. Response has been good from students, school administrators and parents. We are convinced part of this success has been due to doing our homework first. That includes a local assessment of community support as we have described.

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

SEX

Males (21)
Females (96

MARITAL STATUS

Single (32)
Married (74)
Previously Married (12)

CHILDREN

Have Children (70)
No Children (48)
High School Age or Younger (47)

TALKED ABOUT CONTRACEPTIVES WITH CHILDREN

Yes (14)
No (34)

FREQUENCY CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Do Not Attend (29)
A Few Times/Year (16)
Once, Twice/Month (14)
At Least Once/Week (58)

AGE

Range 15 - 96
Under 40 (67)
Over 40 (41)

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Less Than High School (27)
High School Graduate (33)
At Least Some College (55)

TALKED ABOUT SEX WITH CHILDREN

Yes (35)
No (13)

RELIGIOUSLY AFFILIATED

Yes (79)
No (39)

DENOMINATION

Fundamentalist (34)
Conservative (20)
Moderate (22)
Liberal (40)

TABLE 2

SUMMARY OF ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN STANCE ON SEX EDUCATION AND RELEVANT FACTORS

FACTOR	CRAMER'S V	CHI-SQUARE	DF	PROBABILITY	N
Sex	0.1431	2.396	2	0.302	117
Age	0.2764	9.011	2	0.00	118
Marital Status	0.1875	8.295	4	0.081	118
Educational Background	0.2345	12.654	4	0.013	115
Children	0.1222	1.763	2	0.400	118
Talked About Sex	0.2978	4.256	2	0.119	48
Talked About Contraceptives	0.3475	6.592	2	0.037	48
Religiously Affiliated	0.2550	7.670	2	0.022	118
Frequency of Attendance	0.3204	24.034	6	0.0005	117
Denomination	0.3079	12.248	6	0.058	116

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